1776 in World History
The American Revolution as Bourgeois Revolution

James M. Vaughn

I. Introduction: The Bourgeois Revolution(s) and the American Revolution

In the period stretching from the outbreak of the Seven Years' War to the *coup d'état* that brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power in revolutionary France, the old order in Europe and North America gave up the ghost and passed away from the face of the earth. For the years between 1760 and 1800 were, as the liberal historian R. R. Palmer masterfully argued, the Age of the Democratic Revolution.[1] By the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment had eroded many of the intellectual and cultural foundations of the Ancien Régime. New patterns of commercialization and urbanization, and new forms of sociability and venues of public discussion, had transformed and bourgeoisified the kingdoms of Western Europe. The fiscal and military capacities of the leading powers nearly came to ruin during the worldwide Seven Years' War (*c*. 1754–1763), and this led many states to undertake wide-ranging reforms in the conflict's wake. This upheaval and instability did not only affect the absolute monarchies of the continent, such as Bourbon France and Habsburg Austria, but also what many considered to be the freest society in the West, if not the world: the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The island kingdom's institutions were seen by many as increasingly inadequate to the changed social and intellectual landscape of the mid- to late eighteenth century. With the growth of colonial American resistance to post-war imperial reforms and the birth of the Wilkesite movement in 1763, the British Crown and Parliament faced riotous subjects making more assertive, and often new, demands on both sides of the ocean. By the 1760s, many societies in the Atlantic world were experiencing tremors that shook their political, economic, cultural, and intellectual foundations.

Such crises and upheavals had taken place before, and the Ancien Régime had survived largely intact, although not without adjustments and changes. Thus, the fact that this post-1760 period of instabilityl eventually led to the wholesale creation of radically new political foundations for society—above all, to the birth of the modern democratic republic, a republic fit not for Greek and Roman antiquity but for the era of commercial and manufacturing capitalism—cannot be explained by the crises and upheavals themselves. Why did the Ancien Régime collapse this time? Why did the old world experience sickness unto death? And why was a new world born from it?

The key turning points in these ongoing crises and upheavals leading to fundamentally new political and social forms were of course the American Revolution of 1776 and the Great French Revolution of 1789. While the Enlightenment was the cauldron in which these transformations brewed, it was the revolutions of 1776 and 1789 that not only considerably altered existing institutions and practices, as was the case with England's Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, but also uprooted long-standing political foundations and laid down fundamentally new ones, those of the constitutional republic. The American and French revolutions transformed the post-1760 period of crisis and upheaval into the beginning of an Age of Revolution throughout the Atlantic world that lasted from the last quarter of the eighteenth century into the middle decades of the nineteenth, until the Europe-wide revolutions of 1848 ended in failure and defeat.

During the revolutions of 1776 and 1789, and throughout the revolutionary epoch they inaugurated, members of the traditional elite played an important role, but political and social change was powerfully driven by plebeian radicalism and popular mobilization. The hallmark of this revolutionary epoch was not merely that it "began the world anew," for there has been far-reaching change in social and political life throughout recorded history, but also that this new world was built by "the people," ranging from radical aristocrats and priests to middling lawyers and merchants to humble artisans and the laboring poorwith a level of self-consciousness, expressed in pamphlets and parliamentary debates as well as in military mobilizations and street demonstrations, not seen before in world history. During the Age of Revolution, people were not merely *subjected* to historical change, but rather they became the genuine *subjects*—that is, self-conscious agents—of historical change.

The American and French revolutions were part of an ongoing process of bourgeois revolution inaugurated by the Dutch Revolt (c. 1568-1648) and deepened with the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century and the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. Taken together, these revolutions constituted an ongoing process of bourgeois revolution because they were all moments when men and women, with increasing self-consciousness, attempted to realize the potential for human emancipation contained within the crisis and breakdown of traditional agrarian civilization, a crisis that began on the far western periphery of the Eurasian landmass but which eventually spread across the globe.

The crises and upheavals that afflicted Western Europe in the late medieval and early modern period loosened the Great Chain of Being, a chain in which the orders of rank and privilege that determined one's life trajectory at birth were understood as merely one element in a divinely-ordained hierarchy linking the world of the living with the worlds of the dead and the unborn. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the revolt of the Third Estate rushed through the cracks and fissures created in the Great Chain of Being and brought traditional agrarian civilization crashing down around it. The classic bourgeois revolutions were one great revolt of the Third Estate, of those who work, against the world that consigned them to labor and toil off the stage of history. Radical aristocrats and clergymen played vital and essential roles in the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century—one need only think of the 2nd Earl of Warwick in the English Civil Wars, Bishop Gilbert Burnet in the Glorious Revolution and its aftermath, the Marquis de Lafayette in the American and French revolutions, and the Abbé Sieyès throughout the French Revolution. These figures were not beholden to the bourgeoisie or future capitalist class, but rather acted on behalf of the Third Estate of those who work, which included wealthy merchants in Amsterdam, prosperous planters in Virginia, middling shopkeepers in London, thrifty artisans in Brussels, plebeian laborers in Paris, and slaves in Saint Domingue. This great revolt of the Third Estate brought the workers of the world onto the stage of history, and they used their newfound political power to emancipate labor and to unshackle the exchange of its products.

The emergence and advance of the bourgeoisie was bound up with, and expressive of, humanity's struggle for self-emancipation and self-determination in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This struggle propelled elements of the bourgeoisie to the forefront of the epoch-making politics of the Dutch Revolt, the English Commonwealth, and the French Revolution. As Karl Marx argued in the midst of the revolutionary upheavals of 1848,

> The revolution of 1789 was (at least in Europe) only prefigured by the revolution of 1648, which in turn was only prefigured by the rising of the Netherlands against Spain. Both revolutions were approximately a century in advance of their predecessors, not only in time but also in content.... The revolutions of 1648 and 1789 were not *English* and *French* revolutions; they were revolutions of a *European* pattern. They were not the victory of a *particular* class of society over the *old political order*; they were the *proclamation of the political order for the new European society*. In these revolutions the *bourgeoisie* gained the victory; but the *victory of the bourgeoisie* was at that time the *victory of a new social order*, the victory of bourgeois property over feudal property, of nationality over provincialism, of competition over the guild, or the partition of estates over primogeniture, of the owner's mastery of the land over the land's mastery of its owner, of enlightenment over superstition, of the family over the family name, of industry over heroic laziness, of civil law over privileges of medieval origin. The revolution of 1648 was the victory of the seventeenth century over the sixteenth century, the revolution of 1789 was the victory of the eighteenth century over the seventeenth century. Still more than expressing the needs of the parts of the world in which they took place, England and France, these revolutions expressed the needs of the whole world, as it existed then.[2]

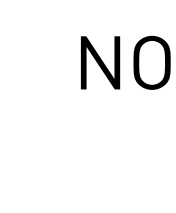
Indeed, the "rise of the bourgeoisie" and the expansion of the capitalist economy were symptoms of the social transformation of humanity from the bottom up. The bourgeois revolutions were the moments of conflict and crisis during which the potentials for collective and individual emancipation, made possible by the breakdown of traditional agrarian civilization and the rise of the commodity form of labor, were politically realized.

In undertaking these assaults on the Ancien Régime in 1572, 1648, 1688, 1776, and 1789, the increasingly self-conscious revolutionaries transformed the Atlantic zone of Western Europe and North America into the most advanced global region of pre-industrial manufacturing and commercial capitalism, possessing unparalleled degrees of civic freedom, economic dynamism, religious toleration, fluid sociability, and public debate, as well as highly rationalized and centralized states wielding vastly enhanced revenue-raising capacities. In this Atlantic revolutionary zone, free wage labor and urbanization—and, with them, the erosion of custom- and caste-based forms of social organization—advanced farther than ever before during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth century. Taken together, these revolutions consolidated the commodity form of the exchange of labor and, thus, politically constituted bourgeois society.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the revolutionaries of the Atlantic world were laying down the foundations for the spread of representative republics and the universalization of free labor throughout the globe. As Thomas Paine wrote in *Rights of Man*, one of the most widely read and circulated works of the eighteenth century, the Atlantic revolutionary world was on the cusp of ushering in a new dawn for humanity:

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Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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James M. Vaughn

1776 IN WORLD HISTORY

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began, we must now turn to the greatest achievement of the heroic phase of bourgeois radicalism: namely, the Radical Enlightenment. For it was with this intellectual movement, and the modern project of freedom that it midwifed into the world, that emergent bourgeois society became conscious of itself and its greatest potentials.

III. The Radical Enlightenment and the Modern Project of Freedom

In terms of the Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of history, freedom is not an existential condition or a timeless universal but rather a task of modernity first raised to the level of consciousness by the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. It was the intellectual work of the Enlightenment that made the European and Atlantic reading public aware of the fact that they lived in a new epoch created by the crisis and break-up of Latin Christendom, the expansion of commercial and colonial developments, the disenchantment of nature by science, and the political revolutions subordinating the state to civil society. As numerous Enlightenment theorists argued, humanity was tasked by modernity.

The "modern age" or modernity of which the Enlightenment spoke tasked humanity because it represented not only historical change but also *a profound change within the process of historical change itself*. Transformations in the way men and women related to and interacted with one another—that is, transformations in the way men and women constituted society—and, as a consequence, transformations in the way men and women interacted with nature and with their innermost selves, were not only *quantitatively increasing* in terms of an ever-quickening pace but also *qualitatively changing* in the sense of rendering history more susceptible to human reason. That is, it was increasingly possible for men and women to critically reflect on, and to raise their self-awareness, of how they constitute and re-constitute themselves over time through interaction in society and through their society's interaction with their innermost selves and with their natural environment. It was possible for men and women to become more self-aware of how they constitute their innermost subjectivities and their interactions with nature through their social practices.

Through such critical self-awareness, humanity might better understand how it became what it is, how it is in the process of becoming something different, and how it might mold, shape, and transform these processes so as to change itself and its potentials. This, in a nutshell, is the modern problem of freedom—the problem not only of how humanity fundamentally changes over time, but also of how this change might be ever-increasingly directed by human self-consciousness so as to open up possibilities for the *further* development of human self-consciousness and the further transformability of the world according to the ends and aims that humanity gives itself, creating a virtuous circle of ever-expanding consciousness of, and change in, *freedom*.

Grappling with this task and its ramifications in the "republic of letters" ultimately culminated in the radicalization of the Enlightenment with the 1754 publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, in which humanity's ability "to say *no* to nature" and its resultant capacity for "perfectibility" were delineated. "In any animal I see nothing but an ingenious machine," Rousseau famously remarked,

> to which nature has given senses in order for it to renew its strength and to protect itself, to a certain point, from all that tends to destroy or disturb it. I am aware of precisely the same things in the human machine, with the difference that nature alone does everything in the operations of an animal, whereas man contributes, as a free agent, to his own operations. The former chooses or rejects by instinct and the later by an act of freedom. Hence an animal cannot deviate from the rule that is prescribed to it, even when it would be advantageous to do so, while man deviates from it, often to his own detriment. Thus a pigeon would die of hunger near a bowl filled with choice meats, and so would a cat perched atop a pile of fruit or grain, even though both could nourish themselves quite well with the food they disdain, if they were of a mind to try some. And thus dissolute men abandon themselves to excesses which cause them fever and death, because the mind perverts the senses and because the will still speaks when nature is silent.[11]

But the human individual did not fulfill her "character as a free agent" in isolation, but through her social relations with others as they developed over time. Indeed, mankind's capacity for perfectibility only revealed itself in society and attained to a measure of self-consciousness within history.

Humanity's capacity for freedom was deeply bound up with the development of its unique tendency toward *perfectibility*, which Rousseau characterized not as a process of *perfection* but rather of *self-transformation*:

> But if the difficulties surrounding all these questions should leave some room for dispute on this difference between man and animal, there is another very specific quality which distinguishes them and about which there can be no argument: the faculty of self-perfection, a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual. On the other hand, an animal, at the end of a few months, is what it will be all its life; and its species, at the end of a thousand years, is what it was in the first of those thousand years. Why is man alone subject to becoming an imbecile? Is it not that he thereby returns to his primitive state, and that, while the animal which has acquired nothing and which also has nothing to lose, always retains its instinct, man, in losing through old age or other accidents all that his perfectibility has enabled him to acquire, thus falls even lower than the animal itself? It would be sad for us to be forced to agree that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty is the source of all man's misfortunes; that this is what, by dint of time, draws him out of the original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days; that this is what, through centuries of giving rise to his enlightenment and his errors, his vices and his virtues, eventually makes him a tyrant over himself and nature. It would be dreadful to be obliged to praise as a beneficent being the one who first suggested to the inhabitant on the banks of the river Orinoco the use of boards which he binds to his children's temples, and which assure them of at least part of their imbecility and their original happiness.[12]

For humanity and its capacities were not a once-and-for-all finished work, but rather an ever-changing result of the growth of social interdependency and mastery over nature, and the processes of social production and reproduction with which these were bound up. While Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* certainly grasped the "birth of civilization" in the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturalists as a process of increasing human degradation, deformation, and dependency continuing right up to the agrarian empires and commercialized monarchies of his own day, he predicated this narrative of the Neolithic Revolution and the pathologies of civilization on the growth of social intercourse and interdependence and, with it, a vast quantitative growth in, and a qualitative transformation of, humanity's capacities for freedom and perfectibility.

For Rousseau, humanity's growing self-degradation—the manner in which man makes himself "at length a tyrant both over himself and over nature"—was a direct consequence of the development and realization of its capacity for change. By leaving behind the limited animal freedom of the state of nature, humanity advanced its unlimited capacities for self-determination and self-transformation, often with catastrophic results. These expanded and transformed capacities for freedom and perfectibility entailed a dramatic increase in the non-animal and extra-instinctual capacities for self-degradation and self-destruction, by which humanity had enslaved itself. Thus, according to Rousseau, freedom and self-transformation were the preconditions for unfreedom and pathology. Men and women are born free but everywhere they are in chains *of their own making*.

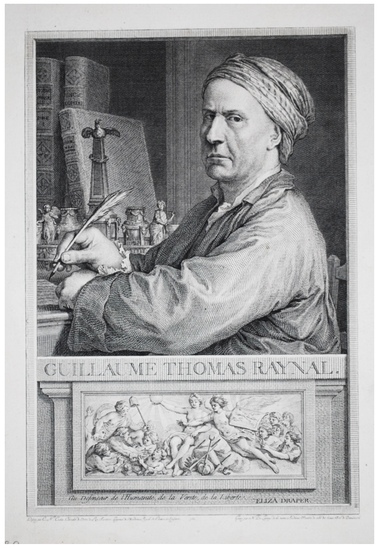
Rousseau's emphasis in the *Second Discourse* on the degradation and deformation entailed in the rise and development of civilization lends itself to an interpretation of his thought as a one-dimensional critique of modernity enunciated in opposition to the vision of progress advanced by his fellow philosophes. It is also on this basis that Rousseau's thought can be interpreted as either a pillar of the Counter-Enlightenment or as an early expression of Romanticism.[13] Such interpretations are not without warrant and they date back to Rousseau's own day. "I have received, sir, your new book against the human species, and I thank you for it," Voltaire quipped to Rousseau in a letter written in August of 1755 in response to the *Second Discourse*,

> [y]ou will please people by your manner of telling them the truth about themselves, but you will not alter them. The horrors of that human society—from which in our feebleness and ignorance we expect so many consolations—have never been painted in more striking colors: no one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes: to read your book makes one long to go on all fours. Since, however, it is now some sixty years since I gave up the practice, I feel that it is unfortunately impossible for me to resume it.[14]

Voltaire's sarcasm was not without its sting, but there was nothing indirect in his assertion that Rousseau sought to tell men and women "the truth about themselves" and, thus, to potentially "alter them." The *Second Discourse* and, even more so, *The Social Contract* of 1762, offered a double-sided and dialectical critique of modernity that cannot be adequately understood as a demand for the restoration of natural savagery nor as Rousseau's resignation in the face of the present.

Rousseau understood eighteenth-century civil society to be composed of a dynamic form of sociality greater than the sum of its parts, one that replaced humanity's animal freedom with a new form of non-instinctual and moral freedom. This new and dynamic form of sociality created and structured (and was in turn constituted by) rational and self-possessed (in the sense of private property and rights-bearing) individuals. "The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked," Rousseau contended in *The Social Contract*,

> [i]t is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations. And although in civil society man surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him for ever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and a man.... If we are to avoid mistakes in weighing the one side against the other, we must clearly distinguish natural liberty, which has no limit but the physical power of the individual concerned, and civil liberty, which is limited by the general will; and we must distinguish also between possession, which is based only on force or "the right of the first occupant," and property, which must rest on a legal title. We might also add that man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom.[15]



Raynal frontispiece (Nicolas de Launay and Charles-Nicolas Cochin, 1780). Guillaume Thomas Raynal's bourgeois-revolutionary writings contributed to the Radical Enlightenment and, through it, to the outbreak of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions.

While the new social world of eighteenth-century Europe was the culmination of the millennia-long development of civilization since the Neolithic Revolution, along with all of the degradation and unfreedom that this development entailed, it also contained new and radical possibilities for self-determination and self-transformation at the levels of the individual and of society as a whole. Thus, conditions were in many respects worse than they had ever been, and yet the capacities for the conscious transformation of those conditions were greater than ever before. Rousseau's *Social Contract*, with its articulation of the "general will" of society as *both* constituted by *and* the ultimate grounds for self-determining and autonomous individuals, attempted to frame a social and political order that would realize eighteenth-century Europe's accumulated potential for individual and collective transformation in freedom.[16]

Though, as Hegel put it, "the principle of freedom dawned on the world in Rousseau," the modern project of freedom would only receive its fullest and most self-conscious expression in the German Idealist trajectory from Kant through Fichte and Schelling to Hegel. Kantian philosophy, with its emphasis on the self-reflexive and self-legislating subject, was the culmination of the second phase of the Enlightenment initiated by Rousseau. "Reason itself, in all its manifestations, does not, in Kant, discover the human place within Nature or serve some natural end or passion; it 'legislates to Nature,'" argues the philosopher Robert Pippin,

> it does not discover the good life, it prescribes the rules for human activity, be Nature as it may. Such a "spontaneous" subjectivity, completely determining for itself what to accept as evidence about the nature of things, and legislating to itself its proper course of action, is, if nothing else, the appropriate image of modernity's understanding of itself as revolutionary and "self-grounding"... [t]he general "German" idea of self-determination or a self-grounding is, Hegel says, the principle of modernity, as fundamental in that tradition to the modern authority of natural science as it is to modern claims for liberal-democratic institutions.[17]

Hegel understood Kantian philosophy as its time grasped in thought. It expressed the consciousness of the moment of the full flowering of bourgeois society's emancipatory potential in the late eighteenth-century Age of Revolution. Hegel sought to specify the historical trajectory of the ideas and practices of the revolutionary West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries so as to raise to consciousness and thereby further the task of advancing individual and social freedom. "Hegel intended the [*Phenomenology of Spirit*] to satisfy the needs of contemporary European humanity," Terry Pinkard observes; "it was to provide an education, a *Bildung*, a formation for its readership so that they could come to grasp *who* they had become (namely, a people individually and collectively 'called' to be free), *why* they had become those people, and why that had been *necessary*."[18] For, while humanity had always determined itself and its consciousness over time through its social interactions and practices, bourgeois society generated radically new possibilities for men and women to raise their self-awareness regarding how their practices and interactions determined their social consciousness and social being, and thus generated radically new possibilities for how that consciousness and being might be transformed.

Drawing on the Scottish and French Enlightenment's discourses of civil society and political economy, above all on Adam Smith's analysis of the rise and development of commercial society in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Hegel specified, as a possibility generated by bourgeois society, the radical self-awareness of humanity's self-grounding subjectivity achieved in Kant's philosophy. Men and women were alienated from their concrete ways of life and customs in the whirlpool of the late eighteenth-century world, with its increasingly universal exchange of labor and its products. As a result, they were increasingly able to critically reflect upon and become more aware of their new social practices and thus more capable of transforming them. The German Idealist tradition raised the emancipatory potential of Rousseau's philosophy of history to new heights of awareness by specifying its historical moment not as the millennia-long development of civilization but as the liquidation of civilization in eighteenth-century commercial and manufacturing society. It was on this basis that Hegel could use Rousseau's categories to narrate the history of humanity as "progress in the consciousness of freedom." Thus was the Hegelian philosophy of history born.

Hegel advanced Rousseau's conceptions of freedom and perfectibility by grasping them as critical-intellectual registers of the potential for ever-expanding individual and social self-determination and self-transformation contained within the advanced commercial and manufacturing society of the eighteenth century. Rather than the culmination of a millennia-long civilizational process of degradation and deformation, the bourgeois society of the late eighteenth-century north Atlantic world could be seen as the latest chapter in the historical development of freedom:

> [A]s we contemplate history as this slaughter-bench, upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed, the question necessarily comes to mind: What was the ultimate goal for which these monstrous sacrifices were made?.... World history is the progress in the consciousness of freedom—a progress that we must come to know in its necessity.... [T]he Orientals knew only that *one* person is free; the Greeks and Romans that *some* are free; while *we* know that *all* humans are implicitly free, *qua* human.... The *final goal of the world*, we said, is Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom.... It is this final goal—freedom—toward which all the world's history has been working. It is this goal to which all the sacrifices have been brought upon the broad altar of the earth in the long flow of time.[19]

Hegel's conception of universal history sought to raise the origins and development of the modern project of freedom to consciousness so as to further and advance it. This entailed not so much a teleological interpretation of the human past as a retrospective account of how the tasks and possibilities of modernity came into being. With this task recognized and its potential made actual, all of human history could be recast—and all of the suffering, exploitation, and misery that it entailed could be redeemed—as the birth pangs of a form of social life in which individual and collective freedom found full scope.

IV. Raynal, the Radical Enlightenment, and Commercial Society

The dialectical and revolutionary character of Rousseau's social critique was well understood among the political and philosophical radicals of the later eighteenth century, and the Enlightenment ratcheted into high gear with the publication of his mature works. Indeed, as Palmer argued, "[i]f one were to name the one book in which the revolutionary aspirations of the period from 1760 to 1800 were most compactly embodied, it would be the *Social Contract*."[20] To an important degree, the theories of civil society and political economy developed among radical elements in the Scottish and French Enlightenments were attempts to further specify Rousseau's philosophy of history in terms of the identifiable and necessary tasks of the bourgeois revolution.

The tasks and possibilities that Rousseau raised to the level of consciousness were not to be understood only in terms of the accumulated inheritance of centuries of civilization but also as bound up with a determinate moment within the ongoing historical break with traditional agrarian civilization. In the civilizational backwater of Western Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, a new form of commercial society had emerged behind the back of the actors. It was this new social form that dissolved feudalism, the medieval European variant of agrarian civilization, and that opened up possibilities for ever-expanding individual and social freedom. With the 1770 publication of Abbé Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, the tasks of emergent bourgeois society and its promise of "universal commerce" were brought to the fore.

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The *Philosophical History* was one of those treatises of the Enlightenment that blazed like a comet across the night sky of the Ancien Régime. Widely translated and published, with twenty official and fifty illegal editions produced between 1770 and 1796, Raynal's multivolume history of European overseas expansion—written in secret collaboration with a number of philosophes, most importantly Denis Diderot—was banned by the Bourbon monarchy. France's Roman Catholic establishment declared the author "one of the most seditious writers among modern unbelievers."[21] The powers of church and state were not able to thwart the spread of Raynal's tomes, which were, according to Jonathan Israel, "more widely read than any other Enlightenment work."[22]

While the *Philosophical History* was a bestseller throughout the North Atlantic world, it was particularly widely discussed and debated in Britain and its empire, especially after the first English-language edition was published in 1774.[23] The work was avidly read in Britain, where it most famously influenced Adam Smith while in the final stages of composing *The Wealth of Nations*, because it provided the most detailed and critical examination to date of European overseas expansion and the country was in the throws of an imperial crisis that stretched from colonial settlements in North America all the way to commercial outposts in Asia. Raynal's tomes were immediately drawn into an already existing and far-ranging debate over the nature and purposes of the British Empire. "The work gained as much fame in the New World as in the Old," Lynn Hunt reminds us, where "American colonists read it as a defense of the rights of man" against the pretensions of British ministers and imperial authorities.[24] The *Philosophical History* was viewed not merely as an effort to understand the world of European imperialism but also to change it, and "many readers, reactions suggest, grasped the work's revolutionary implications at the time and early on it was recognized as one of the most decisive publishing events in all history."[25] Fundamental to the work's central message was Raynal's historical interpretation regarding the aspirations of British imperial expansion since the English Revolution and the betrayal of those aspirations in the period following the Seven Years' War.

The central message of Raynal and the other philosophes was that world history as such was coming into being for the first time in the history of the world. The denizens of the salons and coffeehouses of Amsterdam, Paris, Philadelphia, and London were informed that the discoveries, transformations, and upheavals of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries created a universal historical process that encompassed the planet and bound all of humanity to a common fate. This process entailed the formation of a global commercial society based upon the universal exchange of labor and its products:

> No event has been so interesting to mankind in general, and to the inhabitants of Europe in particular, as the discovery of the new world, and the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope. It gave rise to a revolution in the commerce, and in the power of nations; and in the manners, industry, and government of the whole world. At this period, new connections were formed by the inhabitants of the most distant regions, for the supply of wants they had never before experienced. The productions of climates situated under the equator, were consumed in countries bordering on the pole; the industry of the north was transplanted to the south; and the inhabitants of the west were clothed with the manufactures of the east: a general intercourse of opinions, laws and customs, diseases and remedies, virtues and vices, was established among men.[26]

The emergence of global commercial society was bound up not only with the expansion of Europe but with its fundamental transformation as well. "Since America and the passage by the Cape has been known, some nations that were of no consequences are become powerful," Raynal averred, "others, that were the terror of Europe, have lost their authority."[27] In effect, one of the central points of this eminently philosophical and political history of commercial and colonial expansion was to inform the reading public that the signal achievements of post-Renaissance Europe were not the culmination exclusively nor even primarily of developments stemming back to the classical and medieval past, but rather the result of the fact that regions of the continent were transforming into the nexus of a global commercial and manufacturing society. Fusing the cultural and intellectual inheritances of world civilizations together, this society was creating a dynamic and cosmopolitan sociality that was not reducible to the sum of its highly varied local and regional expressions. For Raynal and his collaborators, the eighteenth century Enlightenment was inseparable from the emergence of the world as such and, thus, with the emergence of world history.

It was precisely for this reason—the emergence of, and the potential for the development of, a genuinely cosmopolitan civil society in the eighteenth century—that Raynal and his fellow philosophes set pen to paper. It was the potential of global civil society, what Enlightenment writers generally referred to as the achievement of "universal commerce," that the *Philosophical History* sought to raise to a higher level of consciousness in the republic of letters. The cosmopolitan civil society of the eighteenth century might serve as a powerful instrument in overcoming scarcity, achieving human mastery over nature, and expanding individual and social freedom on a global scale.

According to Raynal, the eighteenth century was fulfilling and dramatically transcending the promise held out by commercial and maritime communities since the dawn of civilization in the Near East and North Africa. "The commercial states have civilized all others," the *Philosophical History* confidently declared before triumphantly recounting the history of the trading and seafaring Phoenician city-states "whose extent of country and influence were extremely limited" but who nevertheless "acquired by their genius for naval enterprises, an importance which ranked them foremost in the history of ancient nations... happy in possessing so few natural advantages, since the want of these awakened that spirit of invention and industry, which is the parent of arts and opulence!"[28] It was the commercial, maritime, and urban world of the Phoenicians—and not the vast conquering agrarian empires—that provided historical antecedents for the emergent cosmopolis of the eighteenth century. "It must be confessed, that the situation of the Phoenicians was admirably adapted to extend their commerce to every part of the world," Raynal enthused, "by inhabiting, as it were, the confines of Africa, Asia, and Europe, if they could not unite the inhabitants of the globe in one common interest, they had it at least in their power, by a commercial intercourse, to communicate to every nation the enjoyments of all climates."[29] And it was the Phoenician trading and maritime world that founded Carthage, the north African city-state that might have drawn the world into a web of universal exchange "had the Roman power never existed... but the ambition of one nation excited all the rest to relinquish the arts of commerce for those of war, and either to conquer or to perish."[30] Raynal and the philosophes re-narrated the history of Europe from the standpoint of the socio-economic dynamism and potential of their eighteenth-century moment: the commercial improvement and growing enlightenment of their world was neither the outgrowth of the Greco-Roman tradition nor of Christianity and the consolidation of medieval Europe but rather of the potential for "universal commerce" contained in the trading and maritime communities of ancient civilization.

From this perspective, the Roman Empire and its barbarian aftermath were little more than criminal enterprises. "The Romans, formed for conquest, though they dazzled the world with an appearance of grandeur," Raynal observed,

> promoted an intercourse between different nations, not by uniting them by the ties of commerce, but by imposing upon them the same yoke of subordination. They ravaged the globe, which, when reduced to subjection, they left in a state rather of lethargy than tranquility. Their despotism and military government oppressed the people, extinguished the powers of genius, and degraded the human race.[31]

The highest achievement of ancient civilization lay in its potential, embodied in city-states such as Athens and Carthage, to establish "universal commerce." The great agrarian empires were redeemable insofar as they served the purposes of establishing such global commercial relations. Otherwise, the "progress" over savagery contained with the rise and development of civilization was at best ambiguous. It was on this basis that the *Philosophical History* interpreted the victory of Rome in the Punic Wars as a world-historical defeat for humanity. "Carthage, after a long and glorious contest for the empire of the world, was forced to submit to the all-subduing genius of Rome," Raynal lamented, "[t]he subversion of a republic, which gloried in its industry, and owed its power to its skill in useful arts, was, perhaps, a misfortune to Europe, and to the world in general."[32]

Although the *Philosophical History* and similar contemporary treatises drew attention to the historical antecedents for the emergence and development of global commercial society, they nevertheless contended that the social form coming into being in the eighteenth century was both the fulfillment of the potential contained within the mercantile communities of agrarian civilization and, more importantly, the radical transcendence of such potential insofar as it made possible the development of a cosmopolitan civil society unimaginable in the ancient world. For Raynal, such a civil society only became achievable in the eighteenth century. "But the ancients whom we have so often excelled, though we have derived much useful knowledge from them," he observed, "had not means sufficient to enable them to establish an universal commerce."[33] The commercial and manufacturing society of the eighteenth century, based upon the increasingly global exchange of labor and its products, represented both the culmination of civilization and its liquidation and overcoming by a historically unprecedented and dynamic form of human sociality. The "universal commerce" that was coming into view in the eighteenth century, and that which Raynal and his collaborators were struggling to further and advance, was much more than the sum of its parts and the culmination of its historical precedents. The world was to be made anew.

Raynal's magisterial treatise, and the growing theorization of commercial society and discourse of political economy with which it was bound up, was intended not to praise the world of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, but to task it. For many of the philosophes, especially those surrounding Raynal and his collaborators, the emancipatory potential that emerged with the breakdown of late medieval civilization and the commercial and colonial expansion of western Europe in the early modern period was the result of a contingent and not inevitable process; it was an emancipatory potential that only began to be consciously realized and furthered in the revolutionary transformations and aftermath of the Dutch Revolt and England's seventeenth-century upheavals. Furthermore, for Radical Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot and Raynal, the achievements of the Dutch and English revolutions in realizing and advancing the emancipatory potential for the overcoming of civilization and the establishment of a cosmopolitan civil society based on "universal commerce" were in danger of being undermined and lost in the world of enlightened absolutism and an increasingly reactionary British and Dutch political culture.[34] For those achievements to be secured for the future, they had to be advanced in the present. Raynal's history tasked the commercial society and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century with understanding its own conditions and, in doing so, with advancing its self-consciousness and social freedom.

Based on his examination of the recent past of overseas expansion, Raynal was by no means optimistic about European civilization's prospects for transcending itself and contributing to the further development of global commercial society:

> If we consider that the Europeans have the advantage of all the knowledge of the Greeks, that their commerce is infinitely more extensive, that since the improvements in navigation, their ideas are directed to greater, and more various objects; it is astonishing that they should not have the most palpable superiority over them. But it must be observed, that when these people arrived at the knowledge of the arts and of trade, they were just produced as it were from the hands of nature, and had all the powers necessary to improve the talents she had given them: whereas the European nations had the misfortune to be restrained by laws, by government, and by an exclusive and imperious religion. In Greece the arts of trade met with men, in Europe with slaves. Whenever the absurdities of our institutions have been pointed out, we have taken pains to correct them, without daring totally to overthrow the edifice. We have remedied some abuses, by introducing others; and, in our efforts to support, reform and palliate, we have adopted more contradictions and absurdities in our manners, than are to be found among the most barbarous people. For this reason, if the arts should ever gain admission among the Tartars and Iroquois, they will make an infinitely more rapid progress among them, than they can ever do in Russia and Poland.[35]

Thus, the point of the *Philosophical History* was neither to praise nor to describe European overseas expansion but rather to grasp and to raise to a higher level of consciousness the historical emergence and the emancipatory potential of global commercial society. While the achievement of greater degrees of individual and collective self-determination (made possible by the expansion of commercial and manufacturing society) might entail political struggle and social change, any project of increased self-determination was necessarily predicated on increased self-awareness and, with it, the expansion of self-consciousness (made possible by grasping the fundamental conditions and dynamics of commercial and manufacturing society). "The Europeans have founded colonies in all parts, but are they acquainted with the principles on which they ought to be formed?" Raynal queried, "

> they have established a commerce of exchange, of the productions of the earth and of manufactures. This commerce is transferred from one people to another. Can we not discover by what means, and in what situations this has been effected... how comes it to pass that those to whom Nature has been most liberal, are not always the richest and most flourishing?"[36]

In calling for a systematic inquiry into the principles of the "wealth of nations," Raynal and his fellow philosophes were seeking to deepen and advance the very self-consciousness and social freedom they were the product of. The late eighteenth century had been tasked with fulfilling the project of "universal commerce."

The *Philosophical History* was published on the eve of the democratic revolutions that rocked Western Europe and North America and whose effects rippled throughout the world. It was written when many leading thinkers felt that the achievement of a cosmopolitan civil society—a society that was based not on the domination of Europe but on the constitution of "universal commerce"—was on the not-too-distant horizon. It was the hope and the expectation of many thinkers and writers that the world stood on the threshold of a global market and division of labor that would free social life from scarcity, poverty, and coercion and spread the benefits of reason, liberty, and prosperity to all regions.

V. 1776 and the Atlantic Age of Revolution

It was in the context of such theoretical developments and critical self-reflections that trans-Atlantic radicals such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and the Marquis de Lafayette sought to transform existing institutions and practices along the lines envisioned in Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Raynal's *Philosophical History*. While these radicals and their co-thinkers drew on the institutional and intellectual resources generated by earlier political upheavals—such as the Dutch Revolt and the English revolutions of the mid and late seventeenth century—they were living through a global crisis of the British Empire that convinced them that commercial society was itself generating obstacles to the realization of ever-expanding individual and social freedom. These radicals came to conclude that the British Empire and the Old Regime in Europe were using the resources and capacities generated by the rise and development of commercial society *not* to reform and eliminate but to *perfect* and *intensify* the human degradation and unfreedom at the core of agrarian civilization. In order to prevent the eclipse of emancipation, political radicals concluded that the institutions and practices inherited from the Dutch Republic, Whig Britain, and the enlightened absolutist monarchies would have to be re-founded—to be begun anew—on a basis more adequate to the development of commercial society and the possibilities for individual and social freedom that it generated. Although the Dutch and British political and social orders developed in the seventeenth century represented important victories of commercial society over agrarian civilization, revolutionaries such as Paine, Jefferson, and the Abbé Sieyès felt that they were no longer sufficient for furthering the possibilities for self-determination and self-conscious transformation contained within the womb of a maturing commercial and manufacturing society.

Not reform but revolution would be necessary for humanity to fulfill the emancipatory potential contained within the radically new capacities of freedom and perfectibility generated by the dissolution of agrarian civilization and the rise and development of an increasingly urban-based commercial and manufacturing society. The American Revolution, and the Age of Revolution that opened up across the North Atlantic world in the late eighteenth century, was informed by the attempt to create new political orders—literally, to constitute, to found new constitutions—more adequate to emerging bourgeois society and, thus, to consolidate social practices and institutions that furthered the modern project of freedom raised to consciousness by Rousseau and further specified by the likes of Raynal and other figures of the Radical Enlightenment. 1776 and 1789 were part and parcel of a global struggle to fully liquidate traditional agrarian civilization, to overcome the obstacles to emancipation generated by commercial and manufacturing society, and to realize the potential for human freedom contained not in the return to natural savagery but in the achievement of cosmopolitan civil society. **|P**

1. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959 and 1964). Palmer's work remains the unsurpassed transnational political history of this epoch.
2. Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. David Fernbach (London, 2010), 192–193.
3. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Part Two*, in *Paine: Collected Writings*, (New York, 1955), 652.
4. *Ibid*., 652–653.
5. Immanuel Kant, "To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," trans. Ted Humphrey, in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 112, 115, and 117.
6. Karl Marx, "Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America," presented to U.S. Ambassador Charles Francis Adams on January 28, 1865, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm>.
7. The interpretation advanced in this section is developed in detail in James M. Vaughn, *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The Crisis of the British Revolution and the East India Company's Imperial Transformation* (New Haven, forthcoming).
8. Letter to Lord Kames from Benjamin Franklin, London, January 3, 1760, available online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/2456/232257>.
9. For the example of Franklin, see Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004), 61–104.
10. Speech of Lord Chatham on a motion for an address to His Majesty, to give immediate orders for removing His Troops from Boston, delivered in the House of Lords, January 20, 1775, available online at <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/cbo/chatham/chat13.htm>.
11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, 1992), 24–25.
12. *Ibid*., 25–26.
13. For example, see Robert Pippin, "*Critical Inquiry* and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 424–428.
14. Letter to Rousseau from Voltaire, Geneva, August 30, 1755, in *Voltaire in His Letters; Being a Selection from His Correspondence*, trans. S. G. Tallentye (New York, 1919).
15. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York, 1968), 64–65.
16. This conceptualization of Rousseau's notion of the general will, and its relationship with the wills of individuals, draws heavily from Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 55–81.
17. Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 13–14.
18. Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge, 2002), 217–245.
19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis, 1988), 24–30.
20. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, Vol. I: *The Challenge* (Princeton, 1959), 119.
21. Lynn Hunt, ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston, 1980), pp. 51–2 (quotation included).
22. Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford, 2011), 420.
23. *Ibid*., 428–9 and 436–8.
24. Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 52.
25. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 420.
26. L'Abbé Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, Vol. I, trans. J. Justamond (London, 1776), 1–2.
27. *Ibid*., 2.
28. *Ibid*., 3.
29. *Ibid*.
30. *Ibid*.
31. *Ibid*., 7–8.
32. *Ibid*., 5.
33. *Ibid*., 4–5.
34. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 414–42.
35. Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History*, 7.
36. *Ibid*., 2.

1776 in World History, continued from page 1

> Never did so great an opportunity offer itself to England, and to all Europe, as is produced by the two Revolutions of America and France. By the former, freedom has a national champion in the western world; and by the latter, in Europe. When another nation shall join France, despotism and bad government will scarcely dare to appear. To use a trite expression, the iron is becoming hot all over Europe. The insulted German and the enslaved Spaniard, the Russ and the Pole, are beginning to think. The present age will hereafter merit to be called the Age of Reason, and the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world.[3]

With representative republics established throughout the globe, Paine enthused, "nations will become acquainted, and animosities and prejudices fomented by the intrigue and artifice of courts will cease." The vast militaries maintained by kingdoms and empires would no longer be necessary, in which case "the oppressed soldier will become a freeman; and the tortured sailor, no longer dragged through the streets like a felon, will pursue his mercantile voyage in safety."[4] In the Age of Reason, free societies would associate with one another and establish a new order that brought an end to coercion on the world stage. "The civil constitution of every nation should be republican," wrote Immanuel Kant in 1795, and "the right of nations shall be based on a federation of free states," which is a

> league of a special sort... one that we can call a *league of peace* (*foedus pacificum*), which will be distinguished from a *treaty of peace* (*pactum pacis*) because the latter seeks merely to stop *one* war, while the former seeks to end *all* wars forever.... "[T]his idea of federalism should eventually include all nations and thus lead to perpetual peace.[5]

The state's internal and external coercive capacities would wither away as commerce and contract replaced both the domination of men by men and wars of conquest, thus making the civil society of each country merely one instantiation of a cosmopolitan civil society that delivered perpetual peace and prosperity to all. Thus, the revolt of the Third Estate would not lead to the subjugation of the other estates but to the constitution of universal humanity in freedom.

The American Revolution was a vital step in the revolt of the Third Estate and the project for a universal humanity—that is, in the unfolding of the bourgeois revolution. For 1776, and the general crisis of the British Empire of which it was the highest political expression, ultimately continued and radically expanded the achievements of England's seventeenth-century revolutions and, in doing so, commenced the Atlantic Age of Revolution in the late eighteenth century. This is why, when he wrote on behalf of the First International to U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, Marx declared that North America was "where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the 18th century." Marx continued, "the working men of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Anti-Slavery War will do for the working classes."[6] Such comments flowed readily, as it were unthinkingly, from the first self-proclaimed international socialist body. While classical Marxism readily assumed and asserted the epochal significance of 1776, it has become necessary in the postmodern wasteland of the present to painstakingly reconstruct the historical and social imagination that formed the deep well from which such statements sprung.

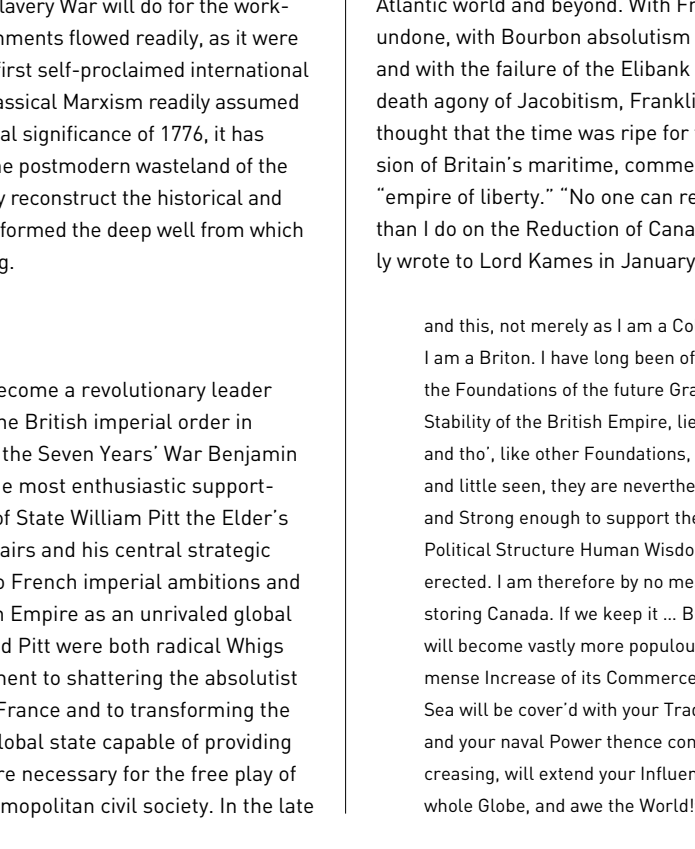
II. Toward 1776[7]

While he would later become a revolutionary leader seeking to overthrow the British imperial order in North America, during the Seven Years' War Benjamin Franklin was among the most enthusiastic supporters of then-Secretary of State William Pitt the Elder's direction of military affairs and his central strategic goals of laying waste to French imperial ambitions and establishing the British Empire as an unrivaled global power. For Franklin and Pitt were both radical Whigs who shared a commitment to shattering the absolutist monarchy of Bourbon France and to transforming the British Empire into a global state capable of providing the public infrastructure necessary for the free play of private interests in cosmopolitan civil society. In the late 1750s and early 1760s, the writings and correspondence of Franklin and many of his future revolutionary collaborators betrayed no trace of their future critique of the British political order as irredeemably corrupt, aristocratic, and authoritarian. Rather, that political order and its imperial expansion in regions as diverse as North America and South Asia were viewed as the adequate and *indeed necessary* vehicle not only for the continuing development of commercial and manufacturing society within Britain and its overseas possessions, but also for the growth of a global civil society based not on treaties between dynasts and states but on the universal exchange of labor and its products by increasingly autonomous individuals.

While intellectuals, writers, and politicians of the likes of Franklin maintained no illusions about the oligarchic character of British politics at the time of the Seven Years' War, nor about the overt coercion and exclusionary violence at the heart of British imperial practices ranging from the Dublin Castle regime in Ireland to plantation slavery in the West Indies and North America, they nevertheless felt that the political edifice erected during the revolutionary upheavals of the seventeenth century, both domestic and imperial, was the most adequate basis for the pursuit of freedom in society. These so-called "honest" or "zealous" Whigs believed that the two central achievements of the period stretching from the English Civil Wars to the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution—namely, the parliamentary supremacy and the commercial and maritime "empire of liberty"—were firmly intact and expansively beneficial. As part and parcel of the defeat of Stuart absolutism and its authoritarian imperial designs in the Atlantic world as well as its monopolistic commercial designs in the trading world of Asia, the coercive capacities of England's centralized territorial state were subjected to the deliberations and transactions of legislative institutions at home and abroad. The supremacy of Parliament and the political role played by North American colonial assemblies effectively reduced the sway of "arbitrary power" in Britain and its empire. That is, the English state and its agents abroad were increasingly forced to govern *through* civil society instead of *above* it, particularly if they wanted to secure the fiscal resources and public-sphere legitimacy necessary for social stability and the maximal projection of power. Franklin and many of his future revolutionary collaborators were confident that the institutions of post-1688 Britain and the British Empire provided a firm ground for the expansion of the market, the extension of the division of labor, and the protection of private property and, with these, the growth of material prosperity, mastery over nature, and Enlightenment. Increasingly free from scarcity, overt coercion, and traditional social hierarchies, men and women across the British Empire could produce and exchange commodities and, on this basis, pursue their self-determined aims and interests.

On the eve of the 1760s, with France having suffered catastrophic defeat in military theaters across the globe, many zealous Whigs and future anti-colonial revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic felt that Britain and its overseas possessions were on the verge not only of permanently securing the beneficial consequences of the parliamentary supremacy and the maritime "empire of liberty," but also of radically deepening and extending them to more and more people living in the North Atlantic world and beyond. With French imperial designs undone, with Bourbon absolutism in debt and disrepute, and with the failure of the Elibank Plot signaling the death agony of Jacobitism, Franklin and his co-thinkers thought that the time was ripe for the maximal expansion of Britain's maritime, commercial, and colonial "empire of liberty." "No one can rejoice more sincerely than I do on the Reduction of Canada," Franklin famously wrote to Lord Kames in January of 1760,

> and this, not merely as I am a Colonist, but as I am a Briton. I have long been of Opinion, that the Foundations of the future Grandeur and Stability of the British Empire, lie in America; and tho', like other Foundations, they are low and little seen, they are nevertheless, broad and Strong enough to support the greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected. I am therefore by no means for restoring Canada. If we keep it ... Britain itself will become vastly more populous by the immense Increase of its Commerce; the Atlantic Sea will be cover'd with your Trading Ships; and your naval Power thence continually increasing, will extend your Influence round the whole Globe, and awe the World![8]



Portrait of Benjamin Franklin (David Martin, 1767). For Franklin and his fellow radical Whigs, the British Empire was an engine driving the limitless expansion of the bourgeois revolution. The radical Whigs sought to extend Britain's "empire of liberty" to the furthest corners of the globe, to democratize Britain's domestic and imperial institutions, and to transform the House of Commons into the leading deliberative body of cosmopolitan civil society. The failure to achieve these goals made possible and indeed necessitated the outbreak of the American Revolution.



A group of radical, or Patriot, Whigs pulls down a statue of King George III in New York City's Bowling Green in 1776 (William Walcutt, 1854).

At the heart of Franklin's envisioned expansion of an empire of free association and exchange was the reform and further socialization of imperial institutions and practices. For the Seven Years' War was not only the graveyard of French imperialism, but also a massive demonstration of the weaknesses and inadequacies of British imperialism insofar as it exposed fault-lines within the Atlantic system of "Salutary Neglect" that had been self-consciously managed and maintained by the Whig Supremacy over the preceding three decades. Yet Franklin and other zealous Whigs felt that the conflicts and difficulties surrounding the laws of trade and navigation, and matters of imperial political economy more broadly, as well as the ongoing disputes between royal imperial administration and the colonial assemblies and associations, could be resolved through the reformation of Britain's imperial state. This might be accomplished either by integrating colonial assemblies and the colonial public sphere more generally in an empire-wide political decision making process or by transforming the London-based Parliament into an imperial legislature that included representatives from the North American colonies. Whatever direction such reforms took, they would have the effect of transforming Britain's Parliament and Crown into institutions more adequate and more responsive to both the rapid development of colonial civil society in North America and the dynamism of the global civil society contained within the vast imperial order stretching from Charleston to Calcutta.

Such hopes and aspirations ultimately came to naught as developments over the course of the 1760s and 1770s foreclosed possibilities for the kind of imperial reforms and transformations advocated by Franklin and his co-thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. As is well known, metropolitan ministers did indeed pursue a course of imperial reform and reorganization in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, but this proceeded along lines directly contrary to those envisioned and advocated by radical Whigs such as Pitt the Elder, Franklin, William Beckford, Joseph Mawbey, Thomas Paine, Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, John Horne Tooke, Barlow Trecothick, Samuel Vaughan, John Wilkes, and the Earl of Shelburne. Under the leadership of authoritarian Whigs and New Tories such as King George III, the Earl of Bute, George Grenville, Charles Townshend, and Lord North, Britain's political establishment advanced a program that entailed military buildup, revenue extraction, and the renewal of commercial regulation, complete with a new array of invasive mechanisms of enforcement. This program was designed to consolidate an extractive political economy and an authoritarian and centralized empire. As a New Tory imperial project, it sought to subject the development of the colonial periphery to the aims and needs of a metropolitan oligarchy by transforming the existing and unreformed King-in-Parliament system and its overseas administrations into an absolute sovereign authority over colonial civil society in North America. This project generated widespread political resistance in the colonies and ultimately issued in the American Revolution and the fracturing of the British Atlantic.

To view the Revolution of 1776 within the framework of "colonial America vs. imperial Britain" is in an important sense to misunderstand both the origins of the conflict and what was at stake in waging it. Not least, such an interpretive framework makes it difficult if not impossible for the historian to understand the well-documented transformation in the political consciousness of Franklin, Paine, and so many others who shifted, in the course of a decade and a half, from being fervent cheerleaders of the British Empire to leading the ranks of its most committed opponents.[9]

The War of American Independence and the creation of the new American republic were part and parcel of a far wider crisis of the British imperial world playing out in Europe and Asia as well as in North America. In short, the American Revolution was one of the outcomes of a global crisis of the British Empire, the very empire that the seventeenth-century English revolutions had painstakingly erected. By the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, the bourgeois-revolutionary order created during the upheavals of the seventeenth century had reached a turning point. Broadly speaking, politically self-conscious men and women across Britain and the British Empire were increasingly forced to decide whether or not the settlement of 1688 was the endpoint of Britain's political transformation or merely its beginning. Were the limited parliamentary settlement and the maritime empire achieved in the Glorious Revolution ends in themselves, subject to no further revision or allowed to change only imperceptibly, or were they the means to the ends of ever-increasing civic freedoms and political empowerment? Was the post-1688 status quo in Britain and its empire to be preserved and defended through ever more authoritarian, repressive, and reactionary (*i.e.*, counter-revolutionary) measures, or were the revolutionary achievements of the seventeenth century to be renewed, expanded, and radicalized through the (further) liberalization and democratization of the domestic and imperial orders? These were the questions at the heart of British politics in the 1760s and 1770s. These were the questions for which the American Revolution ultimately provided a radical Whig answer. And in the process of waging revolutionary warfare and constructing a new regime on the other side of the Atlantic, radical Whiggery was transformed into the modern republicanism (and *not* classical republicanism) that, in turn, served as the ideological underpinnings for the foundation of a democratic republic in 1788.

The increasingly self-conscious conflicts and debates surrounding these questions provided the fundamental background to the domestic and imperial upheavals that wracked the early years of the reign of George III. It is impossible to grasp the political character of the American Revolution without coming to terms with the question of the crisis of the English Revolution as it played out not only in the colonies, but, above all, domestically. For the American Revolution was *at its core* an attempt to renew, expand, and radicalize seventeenth-century England's revolutionary transformations in the face of a reactionary tide sweeping across the British political order in the decades following the Seven Years' War. Speaking before the House of Lords in 1775 against the occupation of Boston by royal troops, Pitt the Elder himself invoked the memory of the English Revolution:

> This resistance to your arbitrary system of taxation might have been foreseen. It was obvious from the nature of things, and of mankind; and, above all, from the Whiggish spirit flourishing in that country. The spirit which now resists your taxation in America is the same which formerly opposed loans, benevolences, and ship-money in England; the same spirit which called all England "on its legs," and by the Bill of Rights vindicated the English Constitution; the same spirit which established the great fundamental, essential maxim of your liberties, *that no subject of England shall be taxed but by his own consent.* This glorious spirit of Whiggism animates three millions in America, who prefer poverty with liberty, to gilded chains and sordid affluence; and who will die in defense of their rights as men, as freemen. What shall oppose this spirit, aided by the congenial flame glowing in the breast of every Whig in England, to the amount, I hope, of double the American numbers?[10]

Although the American Revolution renewed and expanded the seventeenth-century revolutions, it was not merely a repetition of those events. For the Revolution was an expression of a radical Whig politics that had emerged across the British Empire in the mid- to late eighteenth century, and that politics was not merely a replay of the radical Protestant and republican politics of the mid seventeenth century or the Whig politics of the Glorious Revolution. Radical Whiggery was the renewal and expansion of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century on the basis of the Radical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the modern project of freedom that it inaugurated.

While the English Revolution was deeply informed by radical Protestant and constitutional disputes, the radical Whiggery that emerged across Britain and its empire in the eighteenth century was profoundly informed by the intellectual and social transformations of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. Whereas the secular Enlightenment, the emancipation of labor, and the development of commercial and manufacturing society had been important consequences of earlier upheavals in Western Europe, particularly in the Netherlands and England, they were very much the foundations on which radical Whiggery challenged the established order in Britain and the empire. And they were the basis on which the revolutionaries of 1776, and kindred spirits throughout the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, sought to "begin the world anew." Radical Whiggery, and the modern democratic republicanism and American revolutionary experiment that it gave rise to, represented the renewal, fulfillment, and overcoming of the politics of the Dutch Revolt and the English Revolution by the Radical Enlightenment.

The aims and aspirations at the heart of 1776 were not exclusively or even primarily generated by internal developments within colonial society but rather by a radical Whig politics emerging across Britain and its empire in the 1760s and 1770s. The defeat of this radicalism by the forces of and New Toryism was one of the fundamental causes behind the transformation of colonial American resistance to post-1763 imperial reforms into a full-scale revolution aiming at independence and the reconstruction of the political foundations of colonial society. Put differently, the Revolution of 1776 must be understood in part as a result of the decision of radical Whig political forces in colonial North America to pursue independence once the commanding heights of the British Empire had been lost as a viable field of political action. An ascendant authoritarian Whiggery and New Toryism saw to the foreclosure of social and political potentials that radical, or Patriot, Whiggery had recognized and sought to further, and this foreclosure was the fundamental precondition for the outbreak of the American Revolution.

To fully grasp what was at stake with the Revolution of 1776, and with the Atlantic Age of Revolution that it

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